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ABSTRACT

Researchers have largely neglected adolescents' romantic relationships. To help fill this research gap, some of the discrepancies between adolescent couples' and observers' perceptions of couples' conversations are examined here. Two approaches to interaction analysis were used: the divergent realities paradigm, which explores divergences in different peoples' perceptions of a couples' interaction, and the perceived inequality paradigm, which focuses on individuals' perceptions of discrepancies between couple members in the latter's interactions. A video-recall procedure to assess 61 adolescent romantic couples' perceptions of their taped conversations was used. Results suggest that adolescent romantic partners experience shared realities relative to outside observers. However, couple members also have distinct interpretations of their interactions, indicating that they may hold different views of their relationships. Although couple members and observers agreed that couples' conversations were generally harmonious, dating partners perceived their communications through different lenses and they experienced inequalities in their interactions. Both males and females perceived themselves more positively than their partner. Boys who viewed themselves more favorably than they viewed their girlfriends exhibited fewer depressive symptoms than boys who considered themselves less favorably. Contains 51 references. (RJM)

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Shared Realities: Adolescent Couples' Subjective Understanding of Their Interaction and Its Relationship to Their Mental Health

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Abstract

We examined discrepancies in adolescent romantic couple members' and observers' perceptions of couples' conversations guided by two approaches to the analysis of interaction: the divergent realities paradigm, which explores divergences in different peoples' perceptions of the same couple member's interaction, and the perceived inequality paradigm, which focuses on individuals' perceptions of discrepancies between couple members in their interaction. We used a video-recall procedure to assess 61 adolescent romantic couples' perceptions of their video-taped conversations with each other. Our results suggest that adolescent romantic partners experience shared realities relative to outside coders. At the same time, couple members also have distinct interpretations of their interactions, suggesting that they may hold different 'views' of their relationships (Furman & Wehner, 1994). Although couple members and observers agreed that couples' conversations were generally harmonious, we found dating partners perceived their communications through different lenses and they experienced inequalities in their interactions. Discrepancies in perceptions were associated with depression, especially in males.

Discrepancies in Adolescent Romantic Couples' and Observers' Perceptions of Couple Interaction and their Relationship to Mental Health

Popular literature, Hollywood, and our own memories all emphasize the importance of adolescent romantic relationships. Yet, researchers have spent surprisingly little energy trying to understand these relationships and their developmental significance. This neglect stands in striking contrast to the rich empirical base of literature on adolescents' relationships with their families and their platonic peer relationships. Both the family and peer contexts of adolescent development have received extensive investigation and we know a great deal about the nature of adolescents relationships with their families and peers (see Brown, 1990; Collins & Russell, 1991; Holmbeck, 1997; Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990 for reviews) as well as how these types of relationships are associated with adolescent mental health (see Kazdin, 1993; Powers, Hauser, & Kilner, 1989). Romantic relationships qualitatively differ from parent-child relationships because of their symmetrical and voluntary nature and from peer relationships because of the integration of attachment, caregiving, affiliation, and sexuality (Furman, 1997). Developmental psychologists know very little about either the nature of these seemingly important relationships or about how they may be associated with adolescent mental health.

Decades ago, developmental theorists identified romantic relationships as an especially significant context for adolescent development (Erikson, 1968; Sullivan, 1953). Yet, until recently, surprisingly few investigators have explored the nature of adolescent romantic relationships and their connection to psychological functioning. In the past few years, however, theory and research on adolescent romantic relationships has been rekindled. Researchers have validated the increasingly important role that romantic partners play, through adolescence and young adulthood,

as preferred interaction partners and as providers of social support and intimacy (Burhmester & Furman, 1987; Dowdy & Kliewer, 1996; Furman & Burhmester, 1992; Laursen, 1996; Sharabany, Gershoni, & Hofman, 1981). In a recent interview study aimed at understanding the meaning that adolescents ascribe to their romantic relationships, Candice Feiring (1996) found that 88% of 15-year-olds had been or were involved in romantic relationships. Although their relationships did not last long by adult standards (average length was 4 months) they described their relationships as intense and reported almost daily contact with their dating partners. Feiring's investigation also revealed gender differences in adolescents' descriptions of their romantic relationships. Females were more likely to mention support and intimacy when describing their romantic relationships, while males were more likely to mention physical attractiveness when describing their dating partners. Thus, these initial investigations of adolescent romantic relationships have documented their importance and have begun to examine their meaning.

Concurrent with increasing empirical interest in adolescent romantic relationships has been the reformulation of developmental theory of adolescent romantic relationships. Building upon attachment theory and the earlier work of Sullivan, Furman and Wehner (1994) proposed a contemporary developmental theory of adolescent romantic relationships. Central to their theoretical model is the concept of "views", which refers to the perceptions, preconceptions, and expectations held by individuals about particular types of relationships. Individual members' views of romantic relationships influence their behavior in their romantic relationships as well as the way they *interpret* events that occur within those relationships. Thus, two members of the same dating couple may be involved in the same interaction and, due to differences in their "views" of the relationship, may interpret and respond to that interaction very differently.

Views of relationships are based, in part, on past experiences in similar types of relationships and experiences in other types of relationships. Furman and Wehner (1994) also contend that views are influenced by gender roles and cultural variables. In the gendered society in which we live, socialization forces differ for males and females. Feminist theorists assert that these distinct socialization practices result in differences in the ways in which males and females understand their experiences (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991). Bernard (1972) first speculated that in every marriage there are really two relationships--his and hers--which are experienced differently and have different consequences for the partners. Peplau and Gordon (1985) extended this notion to every romantic relationship and pointed out the necessity of examining these differences in order to more fully understand close relationships. Thus, 'views' held by males and females about their romantic relationships would be expected to differ in systematic ways that would then influence males' and females' perceptions of their interactions with their romantic partner. In essence, the two members of a couple may experience different realities.

There are two ways to conceptualize these differing perceptions. One approach focuses on discrepancies between different people's perceptions of a particular individual's behavior. We refer to this approach as the divergent realities paradigm. The premise behind this approach, coming out of a social constructionist perspective, is that people perceive their world, including their own interactions and those of others, through different lenses, thus they will interpret those interactions in systematically different ways (Gergen, 1994a; 1994b; 1991; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990; Hoffman, 1990). This approach acknowledges the existence of multiple realities, or the idea that peoples' individual narratives about themselves, their relationships, and their world impact the ways in which

they interpret the meanings of their interactions. Thus, two individuals could observe or participate in the same social interaction and have markedly divergent accounts of the interaction. Questions based on the divergent realities paradigm focus on whether couple members view the same behavior in their interactions differently. For example, do couple members agree about how supportive or conflictual a girlfriend was being in a particular interaction with her boyfriend? Or, do couple members agree with a trained outside observer about how supportive or conflictual the girlfriend was being in the same interaction? This approach also allows for the examination of whether these shared or divergent realities experienced by couple members are associated with their psychological health.

A second approach to understanding discrepancies in perceptions of communications, which we refer to as the perceived inequality paradigm, involves the examination of couple members' perceived differences between themselves and their partners. Perceptions of inequality in couples' interactions suggest a power imbalance in their relationship. Power and status in our society are unequally distributed between males and females. This leads to cultural expectations that men will wield more power and women will be more easily influenced. These expectations, held by males and females, may influence the perceptions of couples' interactions such that they confirm the original expectations (Eagly & Wood, 1985). Questionnaire studies of college-aged romantic couples have found that couple members perceived male partners as more likely to try to persuade their girlfriends, while female partners were perceived as more likely to withdraw or become silent (Falbo & Peplau, 1980). Cultural myths also identify females as the holders of connection and support in relationships (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991). Based on the assumption that cultural expectations influence the meaning people attribute to the behaviors of

others and themselves, we would have expected males and females to perceive inequalities in their interactions consistent with cultural stereotypes of males and females in relationships.

Alternatively, social psychologists have documented the potency of the self-serving bias, specifically, the "better than average" effect, which asserts that people tend to overestimate themselves when compared with others on dimensions that are subjective and socially desirable. According to this bias, both males and females would have been expected to view themselves in a more positive light than they viewed their dating partner. Thus, they should have perceived more power, humor, and supportive behaviors in their own interactions than in those of their partners. The methodology we used allowed us to directly assess the relationship between gender and perceptions of inequality in adolescent romantic couples' interactions as well as the relationship between perceptions of inequality and psychological functioning.

Given the infant status of research on adolescent romantic relationships, there are numerous unexplored avenues which might prove fruitful for researchers to investigate. Wyndol Furman, in a recent invited address (1997), noted that research on adolescent romantic couples thus far has been demographic in nature. He illuminated the need for research aimed at explaining how romantic relationships function. In addition, Feiring (1996) highlighted the need for observational investigations of adolescent romantic couples. Both of these suggestions are best investigated in the context of adolescent *couples*. Most researchers thus far have investigated adolescent romantic couples by surveying or interviewing *individual* adolescents about their relationships. Deborah Capaldi and her colleagues (Capaldi, Crosby, & Clark, 1997) provide useful exceptions with their recent work. They observed a group of high-risk adolescent boys interacting with their girlfriends in an effort to understand the roots of psychological and physical aggression in adult romantic

relationships. Observed aggression between the couple members in their video-taped interaction was associated with depressive symptoms, low self esteem, and antisocial behavior in female partners and with antisocial behavior in male partners. Their intriguing study accentuates the utility and importance of approaching the study of romantic relationships with the couple as the unit of analysis.

In this paper, we discuss results from our project which examined the nature of adolescent romantic partners' interaction and the relationship between their communication patterns and their psychological health. Using the couple as the unit of analysis, we examined the nature of discrepancies in members' perceptions of their conversations with each other and how these discrepancies were associated with their mental health. We also examined the perceptions of trained coders in order to further understand divergent views of these young couples' interactions.

We measured depressive symptomatology as our index of mental health because of its great importance during the adolescent period. Anne Petersen and her colleagues (1993) concluded that "depression stands out among the psychological problems of adolescence, both for its impact on adjustment during the adolescent years and its long-term effects on adult psychological functioning" (p.159). In fact, in 30 studies of *nonclinical* adolescent samples, 20-35% of boys and 25-40% of girls reported depressed mood (Petersen et al., 1993). Research has found that depressive symptoms were related to family members' perceptions of adolescent-parent interaction (Powers & Welsh, in press; Sanders, Dadds, Johnston, & Cash, 1992; Welsh, Vickerman, & Powers, 1997). Additionally, as we noted earlier, raters' perceptions of adolescent dating couples' interaction were associated with depressive symptoms in females (Capaldi, Crosby, & Clark, 1997). The adult literature has also found observed interactional patterns in married couples to be associated with

depression in one of the members of the couple (Biglan, Hops, Sherman, Friedman, Authur, & Osteen, 1985; Nelson & Beach, 1990).

In summary, we examined adolescent romantic couples' and trained outside coders' views of the couples' observed interaction. We drew upon the divergent realities and the perceived inequalities paradigms to understand discrepancies in their perceptions. Specifically, drawing on the divergent realities paradigm, we asked first, whether members of adolescent couples or trained coders perceived the behaviors of *individual* members (either the male or female) differently, and second, whether members of couples who have divergent perceptions of their communications were more likely to experience depressive symptoms. Drawing upon the inequality paradigm, we asked whether either adolescents or trained, mature coders perceived inequalities in the communications between dating partners. Also, we wondered whether adolescents who perceived inequalities between themselves and their romantic partners in their communications were more likely to experience depressive symptoms.

Methods

Participants

Sixty-one heterosexual adolescent couples, 16-20 years of age (mean= 18.3), who had been dating a minimum of four weeks participated in our study. Couples ranged in the length of their dating relationship between four weeks and five years (median=eight months). Thirty-seven couples were recruited using local high-school year books or lists of recent graduates from the newspapers and 24 were recruited from college courses. Couples contacted through lists of high school students or recent high school graduates were paid $60. Participants contacted through college courses received extra credit for their participation.

Most of the participants lived with two parents (72% of girls and 57% of boys). Although many of the participants held part-time jobs (49% of girls and 28% of boys), almost all were enrolled in either high school or college (80% of girls and 74% of boys). The couples in the sample were primarily European-American (90% of girls and 93% of boys), with the remainder being comprised of approximately 2-3% each of Native American, Asian, African American, and Hispanic individuals.

Procedure and Measures.

Couples came to our laboratory for a total of 4 ½ hours of data collection. They did this in either one or two sessions depending upon their schedules. Our lab consists of a suite of 3 separate rooms so that couples had privacy from our staff during the video-taping portion and from each other during the video-recall and questionnaire portions of our study. Couples were offered juice, soft drinks, and snacks during their sessions to facilitate attentiveness and cooperation. They completed the video recall procedure described below and a series of interview and questionnaire measurements used in a larger study.

Couples were video-taped for twenty-two minutes having two conversations about issues designed to elicit engaging conversation from adolescent couples. In the first conversation, couples were asked to imagine that it was 20 years in the future and they were married to each other and had adolescent children of their own. They were instructed to discuss how they would parent their adolescent children, what they would like their relationship with each other to be like, and how their imagined family would be similar or different to their own families of origin. For the second conversation, couples were asked to discuss a hypothetical dilemma that has been developed and used by others (Gilligan, Kohlberg, Lerner, & Belenky, 1971) and was modified only slightly to fit

within contemporary adolescent language norms. The dilemma involved a high school female whose parents were out of town for the weekend. While she was home alone, her boyfriend unexpectedly visited. A series of questions asked about how she should behave under a variety of circumstances. For each discussion, couples were given instructions and a written description of the conversation topic and were left alone to have the conversation.

Immediately following their conversation, each member of the couple separately viewed their discussion using a video-recall procedure. Participants first rated their own behavior during the two conversations and then watched both conversations a second time to rate their partners' behavior. For each viewing, the tape was divided in to 25-second intervals. The tape was paused automatically to allow the participants to rate themselves or their partners on six different dimensions using a five-point Likert-type rating scale (Powers, Welsh, & Wright, 1994). The six dimensions included the degree to which the individual being rated was supportive, conflictual, humorous, frustrated, giving in, or trying to persuade his or her partner. Data were immediately recorded by the computer to avoid error associated with experimenter data entry. After participants chose their answers to the final behavioral dimension for each segment, the next 25-second segment was played. Participants rated their own behavior and their partners' behavior for the middle 7 ½ minutes of each conversation (a total of 15 minutes of conversation rated for each partner). Participants' ratings for themselves and for their partner were separately aggregated and a mean score was calculated for each behavior.

Two female graduate student coders (aged 25 and 44) also rated the videotapes. The coders spent four months (at 10 hours/week), learning the coding system and obtained adequate levels of inter-rater reliability (intra-class correlation coefficients were .74 for conflict, .76 for support, .80

for humor, .85 for trying to persuade, .54 for frustration, and .51 for concede). Frustration and concede had extremely low frequencies of occurrence which markedly reduces the likelihood of achieving high levels of reliability. The coders used the same six codes and the same technical procedure as the couple members, except that they watched the tape once before coding it rather than participating in the conversation before coding it.

Center for Epidemiology-Depression Scale (CES-D); Radloff, 1977)

Each participant completed the Center for Epidemiology-Depression Scale, along with other measures used in a larger project. The CES-D is a 20-item questionnaire that has been widely used and has adequate psychometric properties. Chronbach's coefficient alphas were .88 for female adolescents and .80 for male adolescents in our sample.

Results

Divergent Realities Paradigm

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAS) were performed to determine whether couple members and trained coders had divergent perceptions of the behavior of either male or female partners. Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for ratings by all three raters on all six of the coded dimensions. The three coders' ratings of males' and interactions are displayed graphically in Figure 1 and to clarify differences between coders. Regarding perceptions of the males in the conversations, differences between coders were found on the dimensions of support ($F(2, 175) = 5.61$, $p < .01$), trying to persuade ($F(2, 175) = 9.68$, $p < .001$), conceding ($F(2,175) = 37.67$, $p < .001$), and frustration ($F(2, 175) = 14.11$, $p < .001$). Multiple comparisons were performed to determine the pattern of differences within each code. For the code of support, observers' ratings of males were significantly lower than males' ratings of themselves. There were

no differences between observers' ratings and females' ratings or between the couple members in their perceptions of the males' supportive behavior. When rating the boyfriends' efforts to persuade their partners, males rated themselves significantly lower than either the trained observers or their girlfriends rated them, while no differences were found between trained observers and girlfriends. None of the coders agreed on the level of conceding behavior exhibited by males in the conversations. Significant differences were found between all coders. Females felt that their boyfriends gave in the most, males felt that they gave in a moderate amount, and coders felt that the boyfriends hardly conceded at all. Regarding the level of frustration displayed by males in the conversation, observers and males agreed that males were hardly frustrated at all, while females rated their boyfriends as more frustrated than both of the other coders rated them.

The three coders also disagreed in systematic ways about the females' contributions to the conversations. Refer again to Table 1 for the means and standard deviations and to Figure 2 for a graphic illustration of the relationship between the ratings of the three coders. Significant ANOVAS were found on the dimensions of support ($\underline{F}$ (2,175) = 6.09, $\underline{p} < .01$), humor ($\underline{F}$ (2, 175) = 6.21, $\underline{p} < .01$), trying to persuade ($\underline{F}$ (2, 175) = 5.42, $\underline{p} < .01$), conceding ($\underline{F}$ (2, 175) = 21.98, $\underline{p} < .001$), and frustration ($\underline{F}$ (2, 175) = 8.13, $\underline{p} < .001$). Multiple comparisons were again conducted to determine patterns of difference between the observers. For support, females rated themselves significantly higher than both males and observers rated them. No differences were found between males and observers. Girlfriends and boyfriends disagreed on the level of humor displayed by girls, with girls rating themselves higher than their boyfriends rated them. Observers ratings were not significantly different from either couple member. For the persuading dimension, observers felt that the females were trying to persuade more than the males felt that they were, while no differences

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were found between couple members or between observers and females. None of the observers agreed on the conceding behavior of the girlfriends. All pairwise comparisons were significant. Observers felt that the girls were the most conceding, girls felt that they were moderately conceding, while boys saw their girlfriends as the least conceding. Finally, regarding frustration, both males and females saw more frustration in the girls' conversation than the trained coders saw. There was no difference between males and females in their perceptions of the females' frustration.

Regression analyses were performed to explore whether the amount of divergence between males and females in the couples' perceptions of the same behavior was associated with depression. For analyses concerning divergent perceptions of males' behavior, divergence scores were computed for each of the six coded dimensions by subtracting the score for each male's perception of himself from the score for his girlfriend's perception of him[1]. Discrepancy scores of zero indicate congruence between partners in their perceptions of the male, negative scores indicate that he saw himself as exhibiting more of the coded behavior than she perceived him to exhibit, and positive scores indicate that the female coded the male higher than he coded himself. Similarly, discrepancy scores were computed for their perceptions of the female by subtracting the male's scores for the female from her own scores for herself on each of the six codes. Both linear and quadratic relationships were tested for each of the six coded behaviors. Table 2 summarizes the significant regression analyses.

Depressive symptomatology in males was predicted by divergent perceptions of the males' humorous, supportive, and frustrated behavior in the conversations. Linear findings indicate that those males who perceived themselves as more humorous, more supportive, and less frustrated than their girlfriends thought they were showed fewer depressive symptoms. Surprisingly, our efforts to

predict depression for the female members of the couples from the level of divergence in their perceptions of her were not fruitful.

Perceived Inequalities Paradigm.

Paired t-tests were performed to determine whether members of adolescent couples and trained observers perceived differences or inequalities between couple members in their interactions. Refer again to Table 1 for means and standard deviations. Analyses of males' perceptions of themselves and their partners in their interaction yielded several dimensions in which inequality was perceived. Males thought they were more supportive (t (57) = 2.58, p = .01) and more humorous (t (57) = 5.12, p = .001) than they thought their girlfriends were. There was also a trend for males to view themselves as less frustrated than they viewed their girlfriends (t (57) = -1.94, p = .06).

Female participants, however, had very different perceptions of the same interactions with their boyfriends. They thought that *they* were more supportive (t (59) = -2.48, p = .02) and more humorous (t (59) = -2.43, p = .02) than they perceived their boyfriends. They also viewed themselves as more conflictual than they perceived their boyfriends (t (59) = -3.00, p = .004) and they perceived their boyfriends as giving in to them more than they thought they conceded to their boyfriends (t (59) = 2.28, p = .03).

Inequality in couple members' contributions to the conversations was also perceived by trained observers. Observers rated females as more humorous than their partners (t (58) = -2.68, p = .01) and as more conceding than their boyfriends (t (58) = -3.23, p = .002).

As with the analyses stemming from the divergent realities paradigm, regression analyses were performed to determine whether the level of inequality perceived in the interaction was related

to depressive symptoms. Perceived inequality scores were computed by subtracting the females' perceptions of their boyfriends from their scores for themselves and by subtracting males' perceptions of their girlfriends from their scores for themselves. Again, both linear and quadratic relationships were tested for each of the six inequality scores for each gender (see Table 3 for a summary of significant results).

Linear relationships between perceived inequality and self-reported depression were found for the dimensions of humor and persuasion. For both males and females, the perception that they were funnier than their partner was associated with less depressive symptomatology. For males, the perception that they were more persuasive than their girlfriends was also associated with less reported depression.

More complex relationships between perceived inequality and depression were found for the dimensions of support and frustration. Regarding ratings of support, a quadratic trend for females suggested that perceived inequality in the level of support displayed in the conversations, regardless of who was seen as more or less supportive, was related to girls' depression. In contrast, a linear trend for males suggested that those males who saw themselves as more supportive than they saw their girlfriends tended to be less depressed. Quadratic effects were found for both males and females for the dimension of frustration. Perceived inequality in the level of frustration, in either direction, was associated with greater depression for both genders.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that adolescent members of dating couples view their interactions through unique lenses and perceive their conversations quite differently. Trained adult coders also viewed the couples' interactions quite differently than the couple members themselves.

Additionally, the couple members' discrepancies in their perceptions of their conversations proved useful in predicting their depressive symptomatology.

In general, both males and females viewed themselves as very supportive, moderately humorous and persuading, and a little conceding and conflictual in their conversations with their romantic partners. Almost no frustration was perceived by either males or females for themselves or their partner. Trained coders also perceived couple members as quite supportive and also as trying very hard to persuade each other. They saw only a little conflict and humor in the conversations and almost no conceding or frustration. Thus, overall, there was agreement that these adolescent romantic couples' conversations were generally supportive and pleasant with low rates of contentiousness.

The low levels of contentious interactions observed in the conversations of our non-clinical sample of adolescent romantic couples contrast with the high rates of actual aggression found in the observational study of high risk adolescent romantic couples investigated by Capaldi and her colleagues (1997). They reported that 14% of the males and 19% of the females in their sample engaged in non-playful physical aggression during videotaped conversations. The differences between these two samples is striking and highlight the diversity of adolescent romantic relationships.

Perceptions of Observers

Despite the overall agreement among the three observers (male partners, female partners, and trained coders) that the couples' conversations were generally supportive and not contentious, there were many interesting systematic differences in their views. Analyses guided by the divergent realities paradigm, which directly compared the three viewpoints, revealed that the largest

divergence was between the perspectives of couple members and trained coders. The adolescent dating partners were more similar to each other in their views of their interaction than to a trained adult coder. Nine of the twelve codes analyzed using the divergent realities paradigm revealed significant omnibus differences. Multiple comparisons revealed that the trained coders differed from either one or both couple members on eight of nine codes with significant differences. Specifically, our trained coders viewed both members of the couple as less supportive in their conversation than either viewed themselves, as trying harder to persuade each other than males perceived either themselves or their girlfriends, as conceding less than either partner viewed both males and females, and as less frustrated than both partners perceived females and than females perceived their boyfriends.

We considered two possible explanations for understanding why there were more discrepancies between our trained coders and our couple members in their perceptions of the couples' conversations. The first possibility is that couple members do, in fact, experience a 'shared reality' because they are a couple and share similar understandings that others cannot observe. Although couple members viewed both male and female partners as showing very low levels of frustration and conceding, they were able to detect significantly more frustration and conceding in both males and females than were our trained coders. Couple members may just be more sensitive to the subtle manifestations of frustration and conceding in their own interactions and in their partner's interactions than coders can detect. They experience a shared reality.

Alternatively, it is possible that other individual or contextual variables may underlie the divergence in views between adolescent couple members and coders. Developmental level is one of the most obvious differences distinguishing couple members and coders. Our coders were older and

more mature than our participating couple members. Previous research has found coders' perceptions of family interaction more similar to family members closer to their own stage of life. Specifically, mothers' perceptions of their family interaction were more similar to the perceptions of mature coders than to their adolescent children's perceptions (Welsh, Vickerman, & Powers, 1997). A second possible variable is cultural background. Our couple members were primarily raised in the South while neither coder was raised in a southern cultural context. This explanation is consistent with the finding from a study by Nancy Gonzales and her colleagues in which they found trained African American coders differed from non-African American coders of adolescent-mother interaction and were more consistent with the perceptions of the African American mother and daughter participants than were the non-African American coders (Gonzales, Cauce, & Mason, 1996). As Furman and Wehner (1994) articulated, individuals' views of their relationships are influenced by a variety of individual and contextual factors which would include cultural contexts and developmental levels. We favor an explanation that includes both possibilities--that couples do experience a shared reality and that individual and contextual characteristics influence peoples' views of romantic couples' interaction.

Analyses guided by the perceived inequalities paradigm suggested that coders thought female couple members displayed more humor than male members and that female members conceded more than male couple members. As we discuss below, female couple members agreed with the female coders, in that they also thought they were more humorous than their boyfriends. This may be an example of a domain in which gender is more powerful or salient than the lens of developmental level or than insider-outsider lenses. The finding that coders perceived girlfriends as conceding more than their boyfriends is in line with cultural expectations regarding gender roles in

relationships.

Discrepancies between Couple Members' Perceptions

Although adolescent couples experienced a shared reality compared with outside trained coders, they still displayed a number of interesting discrepancies between themselves in their views of their conversations. There were three important themes that surfaced in the results of our analyses guided by both the divergent realties and perceived inequalities approaches. These include the differential salience of power for males and females, the strong support for the self attribution bias, and the greater predictive utility of couples' interaction in predicting males' depression. An integrated discussion of findings from both approaches follows as they pertain to each of the three major points.

Dimensions of power were more salient in females' views of their interactions than in males' views. Analyses guided by the divergent realities paradigm suggest that females saw their boyfriends trying to persuade them to accept their opinion, but being unsuccessful and giving in, and feeling frustrated. The young men, however, did not experience themselves as trying to persuade their girlfriends, or conceding to their girlfriends, or as feeling as frustrated as their girlfriends thought they were. Thus, issues of power and control were far more salient to females in these adolescent couples than they were to males. Descriptive analyses guided by the perceived inequalities paradigm provided additional support for the notion that the young women in our study felt that they were engaged in power struggles in their conversations with their boyfriends of which their boyfriends were unaware. The females in our sample perceived themselves as more conflictual than their boyfriends and as conceding less than their boyfriends, indicating, again, that they felt that their boyfriends' efforts to control were unsuccessful. Males, however, did not view inequality in

any of these power-related areas.

These findings stand in contrast to predictions based on feminist theories or cultural stereotypes which paint a portrait of women as more connecting and feeling less powerful than men. Predictions following this reasoning expect females to perceive more connecting and supporting behaviors because of their socialized emphasis on relationship and empathy and males to exhibit more competitive and controlling behaviors in their culturally driven focus on individual power (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991). We found instead that females were more apt than males to view their interactions with their boyfriends through a lens of power.

The relationship between gender, status, and power has been well documented (Unger, 1976, 1978). Furthermore, Piliavin and Unger (1985) have described the ways in which power relations operate virtually invisibly in our lives. People are often unaware of the manner in which power imbalances influence their interactions. In our study, however, females were aware of power struggles in the conversations, while males were relatively oblivious. It is possible that power issues become much more salient to individuals who are in potentially less powerful positions. It may be more important to monitor efforts to control and dominate when one feels particularly vulnerable to domination. It is interesting, however, that females, although more aware of power in their interactions with their boyfriends, did not seem to feel less powerful than their boyfriends. In fact, they seemed to experience themselves as more powerful given that they felt their boyfriends were trying to influence them, but were not successful in their attempts.

The self serving attribution bias received compelling support by our analyses. Analyses guided by the perceived inequalities paradigm revealed that both males and females saw themselves

as more humorous and more supportive than they viewed their partners. Males also tended to view themselves as less frustrated than they viewed their girlfriends. And females thought their boyfriends conceded more than they conceded themselves. Analyses from the divergent realities paradigm revealed that females felt they were more humorous than their boyfriends viewed them and that males felt they were less frustrated and less conceding than their girlfriends experienced them. The adolescents in our sample had a strong tendency to view themselves through rose-colored glasses relative to their romantic partners. Interestingly, this finding contrasts with the failure to find support for a self attribution bias in the perceptions of adolescents and mothers of their interaction (Welsh, Vickerman, & Powers, 1997). The more egalitarian and less clearly defined nature of roles in romantic relationships, relative to parent-child relationships, may allow couple members greater freedom to paint a more favorable portrait of themselves. They also may be more motivated to perceive themselves well in their romantic relationships because these relationships may currently be more salient in their struggle to establish a coherent sense of identity.

Predictive analyses based on both approaches suggest that the operation of the self-serving bias in adolescent romantic relationships is associated with healthy functioning for these adolescents, especially for males. For males and females, the tendency to see oneself as more humorous than one's partner was related to less depression. Also, males who perceived themselves as more supportive, more humorous, and less frustrated than their partners perceived them and as more supportive, more persuasive, and less frustrated than they perceived their partners, tended to report fewer depressive symptoms. Thus, less depressed boys looked at their interactions with their romantic partner through rose colored lenses (which their girlfriends did not share), while the more depressed boys viewed themselves through more grey colored lenses relative to those of their

girlfriends. Research with adults consistently finds depressed people fail to apply the self-serving bias (i.e., fail to use their rose colored glasses) when evaluating their interactions with others (Ackermann & DeRubeis, 1991; Alloy, Albright, Abramson, & Dykman, 1990). Alternatively, boys may use their favorable perceptions of their relationships with their girlfriends to enhance their self image and reduce feelings of depression.

Our efforts to predict depressive symptoms from discrepancies in perceptions of interaction with romantic partners were more successful for males than for females. The perceived quality of the romantic relationship appears to have been more salient to the psychological health of boys in our sample. Initially, this finding was surprising to us. Prior research, however, offers a possible explanation. Studies have found consistent significant gender differences in the relative importance of romantic relationships for adolescents. Adolescent males identify their girlfriends as their primary source of social support and intimacy; whereas, adolescent females report that other people (friends or mothers) are just as likely as romantic partners to be their primary source of support and intimacy (Furman & Burhmester, 1992; Sherman & Thelen, 1996). Boys may be more emotionally vulnerable and dependent on their girlfriends because, perhaps due to cultural sanctions, boys lack intimacy in their other relationships. Due to the lack of alternative sources of social support, the well-being of adolescent males may be more sensitive to the nuances of their romantic relationships than are their female partners who may have other sources of intimacy and social support on which to rely (Kawaguchi, Welsh, Vickerman, & Rostosky, 1997; Sherman & Thelen, 1996).

Regarding perceptions of inequality in the level of frustration exhibited by couple members, perceived inequality in either direction was related to depression for both males and females. It did not matter if adolescents saw themselves as more or less frustrated than their partners. The

perceived inequality in the level of frustration may represent the perception of miscommunication on the part of the adolescent. This fundamental sense that couple members are not understanding one another may be associated with depression.

In summary, our findings suggest that adolescent romantic partners experience shared realities relative to outside coders. At the same time, couple members also have distinct interpretations of their interactions, suggesting that they may hold different 'views' of their relationships (Furman & Wehner, 1994). Although couple members and observers agreed that couples' conversations were generally harmonious, we found adolescent dating partners perceived their communications through different lenses and they experienced inequalities in their interactions. The lens of power was more salient in females' perceptions. Both males and females perceived themselves more positively than their partner. Finally, discrepancies in couple members' perceptions of their conversations were more closely associated with males' mental health. Boys who viewed themselves more favorably than their girlfriends exhibited fewer depressive symptoms. We view this work as preliminary as our sample size was somewhat small and homogeneous and as this was one of the first observational studies of adolescent dating couples' interactions. We hope future research using larger and more diverse samples will replicate and further clarify the nature of adolescents' communication with their dating partners and the relationship between their interactions and their psychological functioning.

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Notes

1. We chose to calculate divergence scores because they conceptually addressed our questions best. Recent methodological papers have recommended the use of divergence scores, indicating that problems with reliability and spurious correlations once attributed to these scores are not as problematic when examining differences between individuals whose scores are moderately correlated such as couples (Carlton-Ford, Paikoff, & Brooks-Gunn,1991). Other researchers have followed this advice and divergence scores are being used again (e.g., Carlson, Cooper, & Spradling, 1991; Ohannessian, Lerner, Lerner, & von Eye, 1995).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics - Mean Video Recall Ratings

Coded dimension	Rating Male $\bar{x}$	(SD)	Rating Female $\bar{x}$	(SD)
Support				
Male	2.72	(.96)	2.54	(1.06)
Female	2.59	(.66)	2.73	(.59)
Observer	2.29	(.25)	2.27	(.26)
Conflict				
Male	.74	(.69)	.79	(.79)
Female	.86	(.69)	.97	(.67)
Observer	.84	(.46)	.85	(.45)
Humor				
Male	1.34	(.77)	.97	(.65)
Female	1.23	(.76)	1.37	(.72)
Observer	1.15	(.45)	1.21	(.42)
Trying to Persuading				
Male	1.37	(.94)	1.45	(1.00)
Female	1.84	(.90)	1.70	(.86)
Observer	1.99	(.42)	1.94	(.46)
Conceding				
Male	.96	(.78)	.99	(.85)
Female	1.40	(.77)	1.29	(.73)
Observer	.38	(.22)	.49	(.27)
Frustration				
Male	.15	(.25)	.24	(.43)
Female	.30	(.38)	.33	(.38)
Observer	.04	(.08)	.07	(.16)

Table 2

Summary of Significant Regression Analyses Predicting Depression from Divergent Realities

Coded dimension	Linear beta	Quadratic beta	R^2	F
Humor				
Males	.34**	n.s.	.11	7.16**
Support				
Males	.39**	n.s.	.15	9.78**
Frustration				
Males	-.25^	n.s.	.06	3.61^

Note. Degrees of freedom are 1 and 56 for linear analyses; 2 and 55 for quadratic analyses.

^ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 3

Summary of Significant Regression Analyses Predicting Depression from Perceptions of Inequality

Coded dimension	Linear beta	Quadratic beta	R^2	F
Humor				
Males	-.26^	n.s.	.07	3.87^
Females	-.27*	n.s.	.07	4.69*
Support				
Males	-.24	n.s.	.06	3.38^
Females	-.11	.32*	.09	2.78^
Frustration				
Males	.57*	.67*	.11	3.27*
Females	.12	.35**	.16	5.36**
Persuasion				
Males	-.23^	n.s.	.05	3.05^

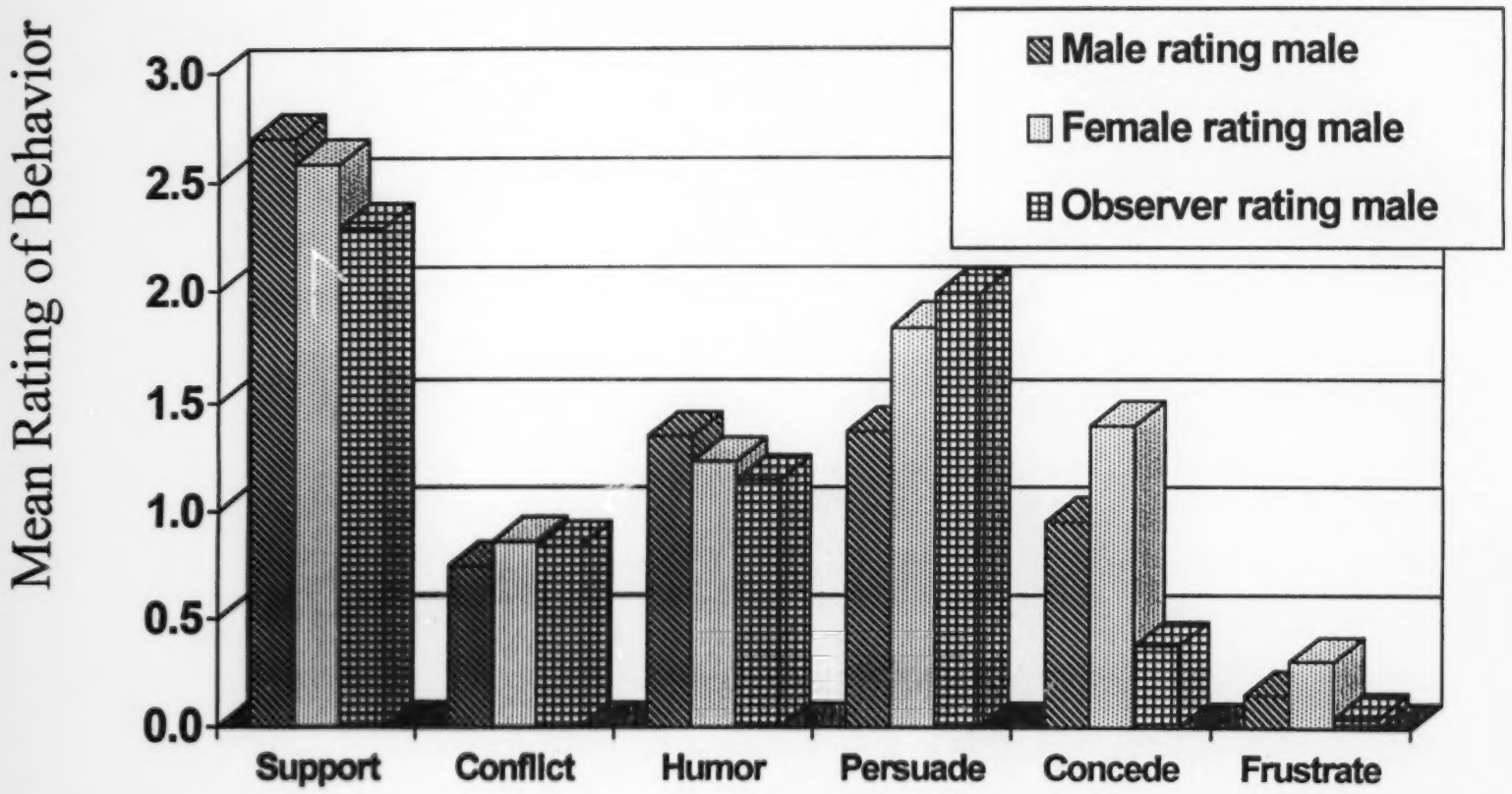
Note. Degrees of freedom are 1 and 56 for linear analyses; 2 and 55 for quadratic analyses.

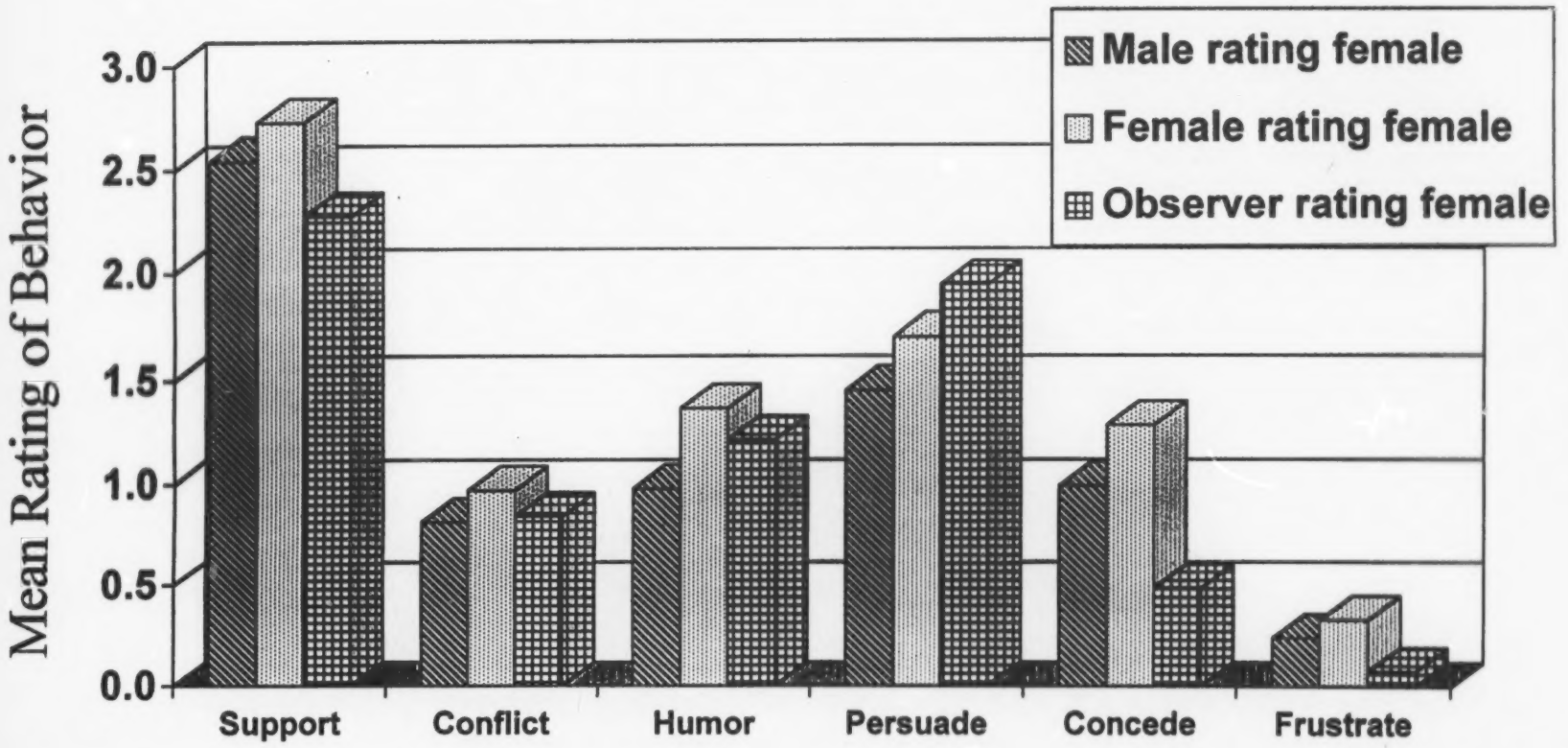
^ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Divergent Realities: Perceptions of Males' Interaction

Figure 2. Divergent Realities: Perceptions of Females' Interaction


Mean Rating of Behavior
3.0
2.5
2.0
1.5
1.0
0.5
0.0
Male rating male
Female rating male
Observer rating male
Support
Conflict
Humor
Persuade
Concede
Frustrate


Mean Rating of Behavior
3.0
2.5
2.0
1.5
1.0
0.5
0.0
Male rating female
Female rating female
Observer rating female
Support
Conflict
Humor
Persuade
Concede
Frustrate